

Relate to children



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At their level

*I*n this series we're discussing five principles for effective ministry to children, summarized in the acronym BRING. Last time we looked at the first principle: Bless children with Jesus' love. We come now to the R of BRING: Relate to children at their level.



To be an effective missionary requires a working knowledge of the mission field. And children are a wonderful, fruitful mission field with a particular openness to God and his love. In children's ministry training seminars, I ask the audience of adults how old they were when they first committed their lives to Christ. The overwhelming majority indicate that they did so in their early teens or before.

A study by the Barna Research Group confirms my informal survey, showing that 75 to 85 percent of Christians in North America made their initial faith commitment before age 15. Furthermore, this research indicates that the probability of becoming a Christian is 32 percent at ages 5 to 13. This probability then decreases to 4 percent at ages 14 to 18 and increases only slightly to 6 percent at age 19 and older. Children have a particular openness to God's love and the message of the gospel. Our challenge is to communicate the gospel to children at their level—in ways they can readily understand and experience.

Now, I have to confess something. I once thought the gospel was too complex for a child to fully understand. But I was wrong. The essential good news (gospel) is not hard to understand. Rather, it's the simple message about Jesus—his life, death and resurrection; his love and gift of salvation. To trust Jesus to be who he says he is for us is, in itself, a childlike attribute. Maybe that's why Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such



as these" (Matthew 19:14). Indeed, children can come to Jesus in trust and belief. As adults, we have the privilege and responsibility to lead them to faith in their Savior so that they can learn to follow him.

So where do we begin? We begin where they are. That is, we begin at their level. God and his love must be communicated in ways that connect with a child. Making the connection involves a basic understanding of a child's stage of intellectual, physical, social, psychological and religious development.

You don't have to be a child psychologist to understand this, of course, though some basic information on child development might be of great help in learning to relate well to children (see my article, "[Building Believing Children.](#)").

Ideas

Here are a few simple ideas about relating the gospel to children at their level. First, tell them about Jesus in ways that are meaningful to them. This is not hard to do from Scripture, because the Gospels are full of stories about Jesus that children readily relate to.

Take for example the story of the prodigal son, where the father represents God who is lavish in his grace toward sinners (represented by the prodigal son as well as by his older brother, who despite his obedience, was envious and bitter). This story can be acted out for and by children. It can be told in dramatic form. It can be illustrated in pictures or by using a flannel board. And as stories from the Gospels are told to children, the message is always brought back to Jesus, to his love and forgiveness and his invitation to follow him and learn from him.

Let me add a note of caution about teaching children from Scripture. In making it simple so children understand, don't dumb down the teaching of the Bible. Children often have far more capacity to grasp spiritual concepts than we give them credit for. With thoughtful teaching that uses vocabulary they can understand, children can grasp the basic concepts of Christian doctrine including such things as grace, sin, forgiveness, eternal life, the resurrection and, of course, the basic teachings concerning Jesus' incarnation, birth, life, ministry, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and return. Some wonderful teaching curricula are available to help us in this teaching.

Don't forget that music is a powerful medium we can use to relate to children and to communicate to them the gospel. I love it when congregations include children in their worship music at church. I attended a church service where the worship team on stage included several young children helping a few adults lead the congregation in singing. They did a wonderful job with all of

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the music, but you should have seen them come alive with joy when the music was more youthful and exuberant in its tone and content.

Their joy in the Lord was infectious as they sang about God's power, love and grace. They knew all the words and they understood what they were singing and kids in the audience picked right up on the music and the message. Through music that relates, children were teaching and receiving the gospel.

We can also relate to children at their level as we teach them to pray. If prayer is sometimes a challenge for adults, it is often natural for children. They lack a lot of our adult hang-ups and self-consciousness. They have little reticence talking to God even though he is not visibly present.

I spoke not long ago with a Sunday school teacher who, as part of her weekly class for 6-to-9-year-olds, provides a variety of stations where they go in a room to spend time with God. One involves materials for drawing pictures that illustrate their understanding of what they learned in the teaching time. Another station is sort of like a fort they can go inside of one at a time to pray.

One Sunday, an 8-year-old boy went into the prayer fort and did not reappear for 20 minutes. When he joined the group, the teacher gently asked what happened while he was in the closet. His replied: "I was meeting with God. I talked to him and he talked to me." There was no self-consciousness in the reply, no religious facade, just a young boy who had been taught by a caring adult how to commune with God in prayer. So that's what he did.

The key is to use activities that children enjoy. Remember to use their names and to recognize their achievements and concerns. Show them by your facial expressions, your manner, your interest and your concern that you care about them and that they matter to you and to God. In your example, they experience Jesus and his love in action. What a blessing it is to be used of God in such an important way.

